Seeing God in Sufi Qurʾan Commentaries: Crossings between This World and the Otherworld by Pieter Coppens (Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Apocalypticism and Eschatology, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), x + 294 pp., ISBN 978 1 4744 3505 5 (hardback, £80.00; paperback, £24.99; E-book as PDF or ePub, £80.00), doi: 10.1017/S0041977X20002554

From the inception of the Sufi movement, Sufis regarded the Qurʾān as a source of mystical knowledge. According to Sufi exegetes, the words of the Qurʾān are in fact allusions (*ishārah* pl. *ishārāt*) which pertain to "divine truths" (*ḥaqāʾiq*, sing. *ḥaqīqah*). Accordingly, Sufi hermeneutics of the Qurʾān is called "the exegesis by allusion" (*tafsīr bi-l-ishārah*) or "the allusive exegesis" (*tafsīr ishārī*). While undergoing personal mystical experiences, Sufis penetrated the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) layer of the Qurʾānic text and reached its esoteric (*bāṭin*) layers, thus discerning the divine truths from the Qurʾān. Their insights which are recorded in the surviving Sufi *tafsīr*-works are accompanied by a personal and sometimes ecstatic tone which is quite rare in the "conventional" and traditional works of *tafsīr*.

"The allusive exegesis" was not systematically applied on every Qurʾānic verse, because the deliberations of Sufi exegetes did not rely exclusively on mystical experiences. The Sufis who interpreted the Qurʾān were also traditionists, jurisprudents, and theologians, and in many cases members of the religious establishment. Accordingly, their *tafsīr*-works which were dictated to generations of Sufi disciples also contain passages of "conventional" interpretations. In other words, the Sufi *tafsīr*-works are also the outcome of intellectual endeavors in other fields of knowledge such as Hadith, Islamic law, and Arabic grammar and lexicography. This combination of esoteric and conventional interpretation raises the question: Is the definition "Sufi *tafsīr*-work" valid? This is one of the pivotal questions that Pieter Coppens's 2018 monograph presents. Another pivotal question is whether the deliberations in the *bāṭin* layers of the Qurʾān contradict the "conventional" interpretation of the Qurʾān.

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For most scholars and students, the Sufi exegesis of the Qurʾān remains *terra incognita* for two main reasons. First, reading a Sufi *tafsīr*-work is an especially demanding task. Scholars and students need to be well-grounded in the following disciplines: Qurʾān, Hadith, Arabic grammar and lexicography, Islamic law and theology, and the history of Islam. Above and beyond this "basic" knowledge, scholars who wish to read the Sufi *tafsīr*-works need to familiarize themselves with the prominent figures of Sufi history, obtain proficiency in the Sufi vocabulary and be able to draw the basic outlines of Sufi thought. Second, Sufi *tafsīr*-works (and other Sufi works for that matter) are incorrectly regarded as marginal, esoteric, and almost irrelevant for the study of mainstream Islam. This is surprising because their authors were mainstream-Sunnī scholars in addition to being active Sufis. Coppens's monograph is therefore a welcome addition to the rather narrow bookshelf of comprehensive monographs and introductory articles on Sufi *tafsīr* authored by Richard Gramlich, Carl W. Ernst, Gerhard Böwering, Alan Godlas, Kristin Z. Sands, and Annabel Keeler.[1]

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[1] See, for example: Richard Gramlich, *Abu l-ʿAbbās B. ʿAṭāʾ: Sufi und Koranausleger* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995); Carl W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996); Gerhard Böwering, "The Major Sources of Sulamī's Minor Qurʾān Commentary," *Oriens* 35 (1996): 35-56; Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Sahl al-Tustarī (d.283/896)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980); Böwering, "The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, ed. Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little, 41-56 (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Böwering, "The Scriptural 'Senses' in Medieval Ṣūfī Qurʾān Exegesis," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al., 346-365 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Böwering, "The Writings of Shams al-Dīn al-Daylamī," *Islamic Studies* 26, no. 3 (1987): 231-236; Alan Godlas, "Influences of Qushayrī's *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* on Sufi Qurʾanic Commentaries, Particularly Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's *ʿArāʾis al-bayān* and the Kubrawi *al-Taʾwīlāt al-najmiyya*," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 78-92; Godlas, "Ṣūfism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, 350-361 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Kristin Z. Sands, "On the Subtleties of Method and Style in the *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* of al-Qushayrī," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 7-16; Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006); Annabel Keeler, "Mystical Theology and the Traditionalist Hermeneutics of Maybudī's *Kashf al-*

The corpus of Coppens's monograph includes five Sufi *tafsīr*-works which were composed in the 11th century, a period that witnessed a growing interest in organizing and documenting knowledge. The *tafsīr*-works under discussion are: (1) Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr* (2) Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* (3) Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī's (fl. second half of the fifth/eleventh to first half of the sixth/twelfth century) *Kashf al-asrār wa-ʿuddat al-abrār* (4) Shams al-Dīn al-Daylamī's (d. 587/1191?) *Taṣdīq al-maʿārif* and (5) Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shīrāzī's (d. 606/1209) *ʿArāʾis al-bayān fī ḥaqāʾiq al-Qurʾān*. Except for al-Daylamī, whose biography is rather obscure, the above-mentioned authors were prominent figures in the history of Sufism. They all flourished in the major learning centers in the Persian speaking areas of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate: Al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī lived and taught in Nishapur; Maybudī came from Yazd; al-Daylamī probably spent his entire life in Hamadan; and finally, Rūzbihān who travelled throughout the Muslim world, settled in Shiraz. The *tafsīr*-works of these authors were written in Arabic, except for Maybudī's – which is the first *tafsīr* written in Persian.

The focal point of Coppens's monograph is the crossings between this world and the hereafter. Coppens demonstrates that Sufis perceived these boundary crossings between both worlds as indefinite and indistinct. According to his description (pp. 1-6, 256-257), Coppens undertook the project of reading Sufi *tafsīr*-works with the idea of identifying and analyzing the Sufi concepts of the hereafter. As the Qurʾān (and subsequently, the Hadith literature) is abundant in descriptions of the carnal delights of Paradise and the corporeal torments of Hell, Coppens assumed that the Sufis would develop these descriptions of Paradise and Hell in their deliberations about the relevant Qurʾānic passages on the afterlife. However, while scrutinizing the five *tafsīr*-works in search for the Sufi perception of the hereafter, Coppens discovered that the five authors under review showed minimal interest in the "tangible" aspects of the afterlife.

Asrār," in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh, 15-30 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Keeler, "Ṣūfī *Tafsīr* as a Mirror: Al-Qushayrī the *Murshid* in his *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 1-21.

Instead, these authors focused their discussions on the concept of seeing God (*ruʾyat Allāh*) in the hereafter.

The concept of seeing God, sourced in Q. 75:22-23 ("Upon that day faces shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord")[2] represents the utmost reward that is promised to the believers in the hereafter. This promise of seeing God instigated hairsplitting discussions in the various theological schools, and raised theological questions: For example, Will the believers see God with their "physical" eyes? Will God be revealed to them in a specific form? These two questions are related to the concept of *ruʾyat Allāh*. In addition, the Sufis promoted the concepts of meeting (*liqāʾ*) God and being near (*qurb*) to Him in this world and the hereafter. Coppens discusses the deliberations of his five Sufi authors on *ruʾyat Allāh*, *qurb*, and *liqāʾ* as they are reflected in four Qurʾānic narratives. In these narratives (the banishment of Adam from Paradise, the attempts of Moses and Muḥammad to attain or re-attain the vision of God, and the procession of the resurrected in the Day of Judgement) humans attempted to cross the boundary between this world and the hereafter.

The monograph comprises two introductory chapters (1, 2) that provide the historical and thematical background which are needed for developing the thesis. The thesis is detailed in five loosely connected chapters (3, 4, 5, 6, 7), and they could be read as separate or independent essays. Coppens's thesis is that Sufis had little interest in eschatological ideas about the hereafter, and that they conceived the otherworld as the primary domain in which the Sufi would see God and be near Him. Moreover, the possibility of seeing God and being near Him in this world was always part of the Sufi discourse. In the final chapter (8), Coppens presents a summary of the research conclusions.

The Introduction (pp. 1-38) raises the question whether *tafsīr*-works written by Sufis should be categorized as "Sufi commentaries." The first scholar to suggest that these works form a separate category within the genre of *tafsīr* was the illustrious Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921). While Sufi authors never referred to their works as "Sufi *tafsīr*," traditionalist scholars labelled *tafsīr* works which relied on allegorical

[2] Citations from the Qurʾān in this review are according to A. J. Arberry, *The Koran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

interpretations (*bāṭin*) as "unpraiseworthy" (*ghayr maḥmūd*) thus grouping them under a separate category.

Chapter 2 (pp. 39-82) presents an historical background of the Sufi movement in Nishapur, brief biographies of the five authors under discussion, and a survey of their hermeneutical practices. This chapter is essential for anyone who wishes to embark on a study of Sufi *tafsīr*. A real gem in this chapter is an analysis of a passage taken from al-Daylamī's commentary of the Qur'ān, in which al-Daylamī planted autobiographical hints. Based on these hints, Coppens reconstructed a richly detailed picture of the life of the mysterious al-Daylamī. It is noteworthy that al-Daylamī's commentary is divided among several manuscripts which are preserved in the Yeni Cami and Veliyyüddin Efendi Libraries in Istanbul. None of these manuscripts was published.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 83-134), Coppens reads the relevant passages on the hereafter in the *tafsīr*-works of the five authors and identifies two attitudes (which, following Christian Lange he dubs "hot" and "cold") towards the corporeal torments that await the sinners in Hell, and the carnal delights that are promised to the righteous in Paradise. The "hot" attitude is to demonstrate contempt of Paradise and Hell, as they "veil" the believer from God. The "cold" attitude disregards Paradise and Hell, and stresses that the reward promised to the believer is to be near God. Al-Sulamī's *tafsīr* which is in fact a reservoir of sayings of early Sufīs reflects the "cold" attitude towards the hereafter. Thus, for example, al-Sulamī quotes Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) who said that the true believer fears only to be separated (*hijrān*) from God; therefore, he does not fear the eternal Fire. In the same vein, the believer yearns to meet God and disregards the material delights of paradise. The other four authors offer deliberations that range from "cold" to "hot" attitudes to the hereafter. Maybudī, for example, criticizes people who are motivated by reward or punishment. At the same time, he expresses his yearning to see God. Rūzbihān, the fifth author in the monograph, represents an approach which is radically different from the above-mentioned "cold" and "hot" attitudes. Rūzbihān discusses the manifestation (*tajallī*) of God in this world and the possibility of seeing Him during one's lifetime. Rūzbihān's immanent conceptions of the hereafter and descriptions of a physical Hell are so different than the other four authors, that one can ask whether he should have been included in Chapter 3 at all.

Chapter 4 (pp. 135-173) presents the case study of the first crossing from the hereafter to this world, namely Adam's descent from heaven, or his banishment from paradise. Coppens leads us through four introductions about Adam in different bodies of literature (pp. 135-143) before returning to the five authors who were so meticulously presented in the previous chapter. Evidently, each of the five authors had a different approach to the story of Adam. Al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī addressed the story of the banishment from paradise by offering insights sourced in the Hadith and the Ashʿarī theological literature. Unlike these descriptions, Maybudī and Rūzbihān crafted their independent narratives on this Qurʾānic story. We find that al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī highlighted the themes of divine predetermination and punishment as reflected in the story of Adam; whereas, Maybudī and Rūzbihān's emphasized the theme of divine love and mercy in their narratives.

Chapter 5 (pp. 174-200) focuses on the vision of God in theology and Sufism. A concise description of the theological paradigm precedes a description of the views of al-Qushayrī, al-Daylamī, and Rūzbihān. As an Ashʿarī theologian, al-Qushayrī rationalized the theoretical possibility of seeing God in this world from a theological point of view. His succinct discussion (pp. 184-185) cannot therefore be labelled as "Sufi." By contrast, al-Daylamī and Rūzbihān enthusiastically confirmed the possibility of seeing God in this world. These two authors refer to the indirect "vision" of a non-anthropomorphic (hence abstract and transcendent) God who is "seen" in one's heart. As Coppens remarks, this "indirect inner vision" of God corresponds with the concept of a transcendent God that was developed by the rationalistic trends of Islamic theology (Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism).

Chapter 6 (pp. 201-226) discusses the views of the five authors regarding their interpretation of Moses's request "Oh my Lord, show me, that I may behold Thee!" (Q 7:143). The chapter begins with a useful survey of various theological views about the possibility that Moses saw God (pp. 203-208). Theologians disagreed on the question whether Moses indeed saw God, because according to the Qurʾān, "...when his Lord revealed Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust; and Moses fell down swooning" (Q. 7: 143). Coppens uses this survey to identify the various positions of the five authors and locate these positions on the theological spectrum. All five authors agree that before Moses asked God to reveal Himself to him, Moses

attained an ecstatic state in which he lost his senses. From this point on, we see that the five authors split between two opinions: al-Qushayrī and Maybudī denied that Moses saw God, while al-Sulamī implied that he did. Rūzbihān claimed to have seen Moses, and that Moses indeed saw God with his own eyes.

Following Richard Gramlich, Coppens argues that the story of Moses signifies the Sufi yearning to experience in this life the beatific vision of God which is promised to the righteous who will arrive to heaven. The yearning to meet (*liqāʾ*) God in this world endangered the normative religion; whoever meets God in this life, will lose interest in abiding by the religious rules, as he already received the utmost reward.

Chapter 7 (pp. 227-255) discusses the possibility that Muḥammad saw God in his ascension (*al-miʿrāj*) to heaven. The story of the ascension and its preceding story, the night journey (*al-isrāʾ*) from Mecca to Jerusalem are central narratives in Islam and were thoroughly examined in many studies (Brooke O. Vuckovic and Frederick Colby's works are the most recent ones).[3] However, Coppens presents a yet unknown angle, that of the Sufi understanding of the vision of God during the ascension. The views of the five authors are presented in their deliberations of the two Qurʾānic passages which are traditionally associated with the night journey and Muḥammad's ascension (Q 53:1-18, Q 17:1).

Finally, the Conclusion (Chapter 8, pp. 256-266) answers the two pivotal questions that Coppens presented in the Introduction. According to Coppens, Sufi *tafsīr* forms a distinctive group (if not a genre) within the field of Qurʾān exegesis because the *tafsīr* sometimes relies on personal experience (p. 256). The five works are offshoots of the same religious trend, although they are radically different from one another in style and content (p. 263). An important conclusion bolstered by previous research (the work of Steven Katz, for instance) pertains to the potential that "the allusive exegesis" holds of

[3] Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the* Miʿraj *in the Formation of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2005); Frederick Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn ʿAbbās Ascension Discourse* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008).

contradicting the more conservative tradition of Qurʾān exegesis.[4] Coppens proves throughout the monograph that the Sufi exegetes developed solutions to accommodate the mystical ideas with the conventional theological concepts. Thus, speaking about seeing God with one's heart does not infringe the appropriate discourse about God which Muʿtazilī, Ashʿarī and even traditionalist theologians required (p. 262).

The monograph is well-researched and thought-provoking, and I believe that it paves the way for future research on Sufi *tafsīr*-works. Coppens conducted excellent research in reading his sources and analyzing them. The translations that he offers are flawless, although it is a bit odd that he did not rely on one of the several consensual English translations of the Qurʾān and offered his own translation of the Qurʾān instead (see for example, p. 240). Even the vocalization that he offers for the Arabic and Persian texts is immaculate. Only two instances in the text were problematic: on p. 118, intoxication is *sukr* or *sakar*, and not *sakr*; on p. 179, the beautiful maidens of paradise are *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* rather than *ḥūr al-ʿayn*. However, these are minor flaws. The only substantial weakness that I find in this monograph is its unwieldy structure. Each of the five independent essays (chapters 3 -7) offers a separate discussion on each of the five authors. This means there are twenty-five sub-chapters about the five authors. Even though the discussion relates to fascinating material, the overall reading experience is that of repetitiveness, which is indeed tiring. One would expect a greater degree of synthesis from a published monograph. As in other cases of doctoral dissertations that "crossed the boundary" to the abode of published monographs, Coppens's work (based on his 2015 doctoral dissertation) could have benefitted from a much more radical editing work that considered the structure of the work. That said, Coppens should be commended for producing a well-written monograph which informs us on a body of literature that is not accessible to all.

[4] Steven T. Katz, 'The 'Conservative' Character of Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3-60; Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-67.

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